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NUMBER ONE
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON CHAPBOOKS
Edited by Glenn Hughes

A SHORT VIEW OF MENCKENISM

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By

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THE FOLCROFT PRESS, INC.
FOLCROFT, PA.

First Published 1927

Reprinted 1969

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1927

University of Washington Book Store

Seattle

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Printed in the
United States of America

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HE who sets out to lam in his own lingo so sprightly an American as Mr. H. L. Mencken must have all his grape and canister aboard, his dictionary of the American language, his trusty spoofer loose in its scabbard, and his white flag. For though Mencken of Mencken and Nathan, those entertaining smart-set twins, was one thing, Mencken of Mencken and Nathan, those self-delivered American Mercurys, or H. L. Mencken —first string American critic, prof-baiter extraordinary, conspirator against Americanism and against women and against God—is another.

As for writing in his lingo, one couldn't—and one shouldn't, for it continues to flow too unfalteringly from its original source; though one suspects that one now hears in it a trifle less rumble-bumble and epithetical exuberance than in the days before its inventor betrayed himself into the discomfort of writing for the *intelligentsia* as well as the smart-set. It would therefore be both

unnecessary and unwary to make pretenses toward a bona fide Menckenese, and the pilfering of Mr. Mencken's phrase-box apparent in this essay is chiefly an excuse for attributing any excessiveness to the allurements of the style.

The truth is that I have just finished reading a shelfful of Prejudices and Prefaces. And it was a somewhat heady performance when any dozen pages at random is enough to reduce a brahmin to a bagman, turn civilization into a chautauqua, and knock the universe into a cocked hat. A certain fat man from Britain who some time ago put Omaha into a quandary as to whether he was a boob or a nut, once wrote a book of tremendous trifles entitled *What's Wrong With the World.* But he is known to be an open defender of the angels and a covert apologist for humanity, and his efforts at diagnosis are infantile as compared with those of that perforator of pishposh, that vorpal-bladed snicker-snacker of Puritanism, that great American sinhound, Mr. Mercury Mencken.

The sins of the latter's lamentation are of course not those of a Brummagem democracy with its pecksniffish aversions to the minor virtues of sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust. They are rather

the sins against the ego, and they may be catalogued, arbitrarily but conveniently, and in the scale of ascending importance, as (1) the sins of God, (2) the sins of pedagogues and critics, (3) the sins of democrats in general, (4) the sins of Americans in particular, and (5) the sins of Puritans *in excelsis*. The divisions are unstable, they blend and blur. An American sins by being a democrat, a democrat by being a Puritan, a pedagogue by being at all.

The sins of God are, or rather the sin of God is a mere peccadillo. It is a bit of cosmic monkey-shining for the delectation of the initiate. For when God created man in his own image he put his tongue in his cheek and gave the whole show away. When God perpetrated man as the ultimate fruit of his creative genius, the "gem in the forehead of the cosmos," he at least had the sense of humor to admit by this *reductio ad absurdum* the presence of a joker in his "vast, inscrutable and probably nonsensical operations." Man so botched a piece of mechanism that he hasn't even a tail to switch the flies away, man that gorilla in underwear whose highest intellectual achievement is the denial of the obvious, man the grave mud turtle who gets his soul assurances from such

astonishing tosh-mongers as St. Augustine, Martin Luther, and Sir Oliver Lodge!

Shall we cry enough? When one has blown into the cosmic bubble until it has gone off in his face is there anything more to be said? But Mr. Mencken has yet to characterize the *doctor dulcifluus* and the other birds in the pedagogic aviary, the right-thinkers and forward-lookers who stuff American criticism with pious piffle and messianic delusion, the bumpkinry whose oafish snivelling and ineffable flub-dub mark upon American civilization the stigmata of inferiority, and the bedevilled and God-crazy Puritans who have so damnably corked and fermented the once sturdy animality of the young American peasant. Let us then hasten to add that men and things are not so monotonously dead-levelled as to be beyond classification as bad, worse and worst, and that we may cheerfully go on with the revel until the high gods, tired at last, "obliterate the race with one great final blast of fire, mustard gas and streptococci."

This is not the place for a logical examination of the case for pessimism, or for anything else. Menckenese is not a language adapted to disputation. It is rather the patois of the abbatoir, of a

ritual consecrated to the sanguinary extinction of the windy virtuosi in whang-doodle, buncombe, and fudge. It is the speech of augury inspired by the examination of the liver and lights of Col. Roosevelt, Mother Eddy, and Prof. Dr. Stuart P. Sherman. It is an utterance that comes down blasting from Olympus. It slays the Jabberwock and goes galumphing back. It tits but it does not tat.

So much for the sins of God.

The sublime, the ridiculous. We come now to pedagogues and critics. It takes no diligent research to discover that the American professor, "menaced by the timid dogmatism of the plutocracy above him and the incurable suspiciousness of the mob beneath him," is as slender a reed as ever bent before the sweep of organized blather, bogus idealism, and mob fear. He is as pitiful a puppy as ever carried his tail between his legs. He is as lamentable a capon as ever came out of "the region of silos, revivals, and saleratus." And this entertaining barnyard bumpkin, this picturesque costard so contentedly cropping the campus pastures, who brayed in chorus with all the official donkeyisms during the late war and who has lapsed from that bellicose imbecility into the

faltering feebleness and jackass pontificating of his standardized academicism, is the nearest approach to an American *intelligentsia!*

It little behoves a mere private in the rear rank of these academic goosesteppers to challenge this pronunciamento with either a pooh or a bah. If after the evidence furnished by the American experiment he still believes the democratic hocus-pocus that the virginal mass, unpolluted by intelligence, can be taught, so damningly believes it as to enlist his efforts in the task, he thereby proves his unfitness to be entrusted with the keys of learning and should be corralled somewhere on the plains of Kansas where he can do nothing more harmful than read aloud to the prairie chickens from William Allen White's *In the Heart of a Fool* or from Ibanez's *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.*

As for the American critics a few words should suffice. There is of course "the *Smart Set* scaramouche," George Jean Nathan; by Gordon Craig out of Broadway, who has the courage to scoff at Belasco and shows a fine enthusiasm for pretty legs. Then, too, there is the magnificently unprofessorial Professor Spingarn, the Apostle Paul for Benedetto Croce in America. And there was

Huneker, who saw the world, thank God, "not as a moral show, but as a sort of glorified Follies." All of these men are worshippers of beauty, here in legs and lingerie, there in Strauss and Cezanne.

But pass Nathan, pass Spingarn, pass Huneker, and—oh, hell, what have we here! Prof. Dr. Phelps, Prof. Dr. Babbitt, Prof. Dr. Sherman, Prof. Dr. More. Is it necessary to dispose of these upstarts again? Who are these birchmen, with their efforts to apply the Espionage Act to the Arts, and their insistence that the artist is not a reporter but a Great Teacher? Who are these fantods who seek to bring Theodore Dreiser and James Branch Cabell under the campus pump? Are they critics? Then what is a critic, in God's name?

When Mr. Mencken has answered the question there is nothing left to do but gather up the vertebrae, fibulae, scapulae, and collar buttons of Phelps, Sherman, Babbitt, and More. Though if by chance we be held as witnesses at the inquest we may find entertainment in the more specific provocations to the slaughter. Consider, for example, the windy dissertations of these interminable talmudists on such a subject as the content of Shakespeare's poetry. As if the absurd notion that

poetry has a logical content was not a stale joke to the veriest tyro in the days of Hammurabi. Anybody but a pedagogue, or a critic, or a maiden-lady culturist capable of applauding a sadistic and public dissection of Euterpe or Melpomene by a Prof. Dr. of philosophy or of kissing a Prof. Dr. of literature during an orgy of a Browning society, —anybody but such as these knows that "the virtue of such great poets as Shakespeare does not lie in the content of their poetry, but in its music." We may recognize, for instance, that Hamlet "had no more mental processes than a Fifth Avenue rector" and continue to worship the bard. His music remains unchanged.

It is of no use to argue that words, even in poetry, are less abstract than tone and that it is possible to write at once with melody and sense; that Shakespeare, though he may not have developed a metaphysic, gave his Hamlet other consistencies than the consistency of mellifluous speech—that there is in the "moony maunderings" of that "diabetic sophomore" an analyzable relationship of character and ideas; that a legitimate function of literature, including poetry, is to show man interacting with his environment, an environment in which the intellectual is not inevitably

verboten; that there is, for example, a "drama of ideas" in which the ideas are really significant, not it is true because the discovery of a Hedda Gabler that it is in some ways disagreeable to have a baby is in any way a useful idea for women tempted to motherhood or for philosophers tempted to speculation, but because ideas even more than solfeggios throw light on the personalities that emit them; that if these things are true there may sometimes be other things in poetry besides "melody, harmony, and clang-tint,"—it is useless to make any of these arguments, for in so doing one merely shows himself to be ontogenetically a boob and phylogenetically a symptom of a race that "prefers *The Sheik* to *Heart of Darkness,* and believes in the League of Nations."

So much for the sins of Prof. Drs. and of critics.

The sins of democrats range from the flagitious central matter of being democratic into peripheries of attitude and conduct that may be described as feeble, timid, inferior, idealistic, humorless, shivering, discreditable, idiotic, cruel, suspicious, vacuous, stupid, swinish, platitudinous, inane, half-witted, stale, slick, oafish, tawdry, puling, tacky, filthy, and obscene. As these epithets serve equally well in characterizing democrats in general

and Americans in particular we shall have to be arbitrary in making a division of the bouquet. Economically, "the essential thing about democracy, as everybody knows, is that it is a device for strengthening the have-nots in their eternal war upon the haves." And it is one of the most extraordinary delusions of such a democracy that it aims at, should aim at, or wants to aim at equality—that a degree of equality is obtainable in a democracy sufficient to permit a considerable shifting from class to class, and that the world would be better if there were more of it. The fact is that nothing is more real than class distinctions and that most of those who have transcended them are merely the exceptional plebeians born to their aristocratic fathers by lower class mistresses. What happens to the lower classes when this cross fertilization does not take place is illustrated by the condition of the poor whites in the southern part of the United States, where the preference of southern gentlemen for mulatto mistresses has left the white masses to furnish a shining example of what inbred doltishness will do in a few generations.

Such is the hope of democracy. The conclusion I think is obvious that there is more hope for

society in a decline of morality among females of a low I. Q. than in all the equality of opportunity ever preached by a Dr. Wilson, a Col. Teddy, or any other high priest of mountebankery and moonshine.

In addition to this equalitarianism, a contradiction to fact buried deep in democratic theory, are all the corollaries of mediocrity which must necessarily accompany it. From capitalist to socialist in a democratic society there is only one generally accepted standard, the doctrine that "money, and money only, makes the mare go—that all the conceivable varieties of happiness are possible to the man who has it." His morality, his politics, his religion, and his aesthetics scream when the eagle screams. If he is rich he goes to Atlantic City or Palm Beach and "rides up and down in a wheel-chair with a girl who knows how to make up and has put away the fear of God;" if he is poor he "confines himself miserably to one wife, however unappetizing and depressing." If he is rich or sees a probability of becoming so he discovers that the world has yet to be made safe for democracy and that America must win the war; if he is poor he believes a law ought to be passed against champagne for millionaires and that Henry Ford should be elected president to put the country on

a business basis. If he is rich he believes that God invented Americanism and contributes to the war chest of Billy Sunday; if he is poor he points with civic pride to the pastor of the largest Presbyterian or Baptist or Methodist congregation in America and goes to listen to Billy Sunday. If he is rich he reads Prof. Dr. Van Dyke on Rembrandt, takes one of the spurious masterpieces down from the wall, and carries it guiltily to the attic (unless he has joined in the campaign to transport Prof. Dr. Van Dyke to Russia); if he is poor he feasts his eyes on September Morn in the art store windows and buys a print of the Mona Lisa for his wife for Christmas.

The trouble, in short, with democracy, is that it is not aristocratic.

It is useless to attempt to console the eviscerated democrat in the words of the discredited Shakespeare, "unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art." It is useless to point to the ocean at our feet and the sky overhead and argue that the whole race very recently crawled out of the one and that nobody has yet touched the other. It is useless to urge that nine out of every ten human acts fulfill the same necessities and satisfy the same desires in

Harry Mencken, Anthony Comstock, and Harold Bell Wright or any of his millions of readers. It is useless to appeal in behalf of sentimentality and bunk on the ground that they furnish the same releases to sentimentalists and bunk-shooters that all this snouting up of bugaboos and banshees does for Mr. Mencken and *The Divine Comedy* does for Dante. It is useless to preach a gospel of relativity and to insist that superiorities and inferiorities are but a matter of adaptability to expression and consumption, that the Philistine is the true realist in a society obviously arranged more for his comfort than for that of either native or imported Mercurys. It is useless to suggest that if some erratic angel were to buy a controlling interest in the *American Mercury* and proceed to view the liberati from that ivory tower he would find them about as dignified and intelligible as any dung-beetles in God's pasture. It is useless to do any of these things because Mr. Mencken's humor is too overlaid with wit to be horn-swoggled by any such arguments.

So much, then, for the sins of democrats in general.

But we have disastrously anticipated the sins of Americans in particular. Perhaps, however, we

can amplify. One of the chief evidences of our American sinfulness is that the English sniff whenever they look our way. And the American's "recurrent attacks of Anglophobia are no more than Freudian evidences of his inferiority complex." But the peculiar affliction of our civilized minority is that this typical Americano, this peasant stuck knee-deep in the mud of his farm, this creature of anthropoidal rages about democracy and sumptuary law and the menace of ideas, this woman-worshipper, this go-getter, this apostle of optimism and inspiration, this admirer of Charles M. Schwab and reader of the *Saturday Evening Post*—in brief, this *boobus Americanus* is the only member of his class in the world who is allowed to dominate the society he lives in.

Need we pause to view in further detail America the home of the Vanderbilts and the Morgans, of the Mary MacLeans and the Mary Baker Eddys; America the breeder of the Anti-Saloon League and the Ku Klux Klan; America the unsavory stew-pot for second-rate Germans, third-rate Scandinavians, fourth-rate Italians, and unclassifiable Irishmen and Jews; America the producer of *Pollyanna* and *The Winning of Barbara Worth*, of *Yes, We Have No Bananas* and

The End of a Perfect Day; America that chooses to march under the captaincies of that simian fundamentalist, W. J. B., of that lover of maximum verbal investitures, W. G. H., of that police-baiting toreador, Cal the Calvinist, of Boston? Shall we ponder for a moment whether there are not compensations to be had from a society in which a shoe-clerk may be a university student in disguise, in which bath-tubs are at least as accessible as grand opera and perhaps as sound a part of *kultur,* and in which by the presence of a telephone in every home the national verbal discharge is incalculably stimulated? Shall we consider, if it be cried upon us that these are the very evidences of American inferiority, whether this is not more easily said than proved, and whether the ownership of a Victrola is not as culturally valuable as a subscription to the *Mercury?* One is tempted to consider the case for even such peculiarly American cultural phenomena as *Yes, We Have No Bananas,* as Krazy Kat and Andy Gump. Have these not in them a simplicity, an immediacy, a directness of fire, a——? But these are questions which we shall not answer—lest we reveal ourselves as chautauqua-minded, rabble-rousing, blithering, and low.

So much for the sins of Americans in particular. And now, finally, for Puritans *in excelsis*.

The sources of American Puritanism are two, from without and from within, from historical inheritance and from spontaneous generation. The original Puritans brought the infection to New England; "a complex of social and economic conditions which worked in countless ways" has matched it with a species of bacillus sufficiently like it to interbreed with a ferocity wholly destructive to the dionysian and the aesthetic spirit. The resultant disease was tempered successively to "the softness of Unitarianism" and "the vague temporizing of Transcendentalism," but in the nineteenth century was restored to virulence as Philistinism, with its pecuniary morality and its "distrust of beauty, and the joy which is its object."

The fine flower of all this goofishness and godliness is to be found in Anthony Comstock and the New York and other Societies for the Prevention of Vice. Mr. Comstock, who published in 1914 a pamphlet entitled *MORALS, Not Art or Literature,* was the personification of the Puritan Will to Power, of the Puritan lubricity of mind that finds obscenity in *Jude the Obscure* and irresistible

incitements to lechery in Cabell and Bernard Shaw—danger, damnation, and death, indeed, in anything likely to "arouse a libidinous passion . . . . in the mind of a modest woman."

May I venture to murmur with gentleness and modesty, with extreme professorial humility—"Booh!"

I do not believe that the glad animal lusts of the tribal American are sicklied o'er with the pale cast of virginity. I believe that nine out of ten of all the really estimable American lewdnesses struggle into American print. I believe that America offers her beloved children as many opportunities for unabashed carnality as any country in the world. I do not believe, though I will accept correction from the psychologist, that the ravages of suppression are any greater in the American than in any other civilized community.

And if Philistinism is the offspring of Puritanism I believe that the evidences of promiscuity against the latter are sufficient seriously to damage the character Mr. Mencken has given her. I should be the last to take Mr. Mencken to task for his championship of the *joie de vivre*, but suggest that not every windmill waving its arms on the horizon is a Puritan or Philistine giant

sharpening a knife for the emasculation of the naughty boys of American letters.

Mr. Mencken, indeed, is not unlike a Babe Ruth who should attempt to win a World Series with a rubber bat. Frequently he connects with an idea and the impact is tremendous. But as often he misses and the violence of his swing leaves him wrapped in his weapon like the tree by the snake in Michelangelo's Garden of Eden. He is constantly finding it necessary to unwind before he can step again to the plate.

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